

## OLD FICULEA.

Of all the soul-depressing spots on the Roman Campagna (and of such spots there is no lack), the most depressing is perhaps the tract bounded on one side by the junction of the Tiber and Anio, and by the roots of Monte Gentile on the other. The very contrast which the traveller observes in the scene before him serves to heighten and deepen the black discontent that grows on him as he goes along. It is a specialty of all distant views to been chanting, but the view that there bounds the horizon has a beauty passing even that of its fellows.

The fairest landscape the earth can show could not require a more worthy background than is there: so clearly do the blue Latin hills rise against the sky; so soft is the sunny beauty of their sides broken here and there by a ravine, or flecked by the shadow flung by passing clouds or by some taller peak beyond; so quiet are the villages and castles that crown the mountain spurs. In another direction a green fringe of wood near Monticelli stretches along in ever-varying outline as far as the lone Soracte, and onward till it loses itself on the sea-shore. In front lies the garden portion of the Campagna, veined by its ancient aqueducts and by the modern railway, the sharp lines of both which guide the eye to Tusculum and the Monte Cavi. There noble villas nestle in the ilex groves, and the sister lakes of Albano and Nemi are hidden in a setting of golden chestnuts. But when the traveller, charmed into expectant hope that this promise of loveliness is to be realised in the foreground, turns his attention to what immediately surrounds him, he finds that he has hoped in vain. A dreary expanse of parched grass, hardly diversified at intervals by corn-fields, is all that meets his gaze. Some trees near running water, and some scanty patches of verdure rather intensify than relieve the air of barrenness that hangs around. A few capacious farm-houses rising here and there over the plain, shelter the household gods of the fattore or steward, until the malaria drives his sickly children to the city or to the mountains. No other human habitation is visible, unless we choose to dignify by that title some conical sheds resembling exaggerated mushrooms in colour, and not unlike them in shape. These protect the shepherd from the passing storm. No vintage song is heard there; for the vine, uncouth and distorted though it be, loves to make a civilised soil the native country of its family of graceful pampini and clustering fruit. Silence is broken only by the lark at morn and even, and by the grasshopper which chirps its song all the hot day through. To be sure there are deep ruts worn into the basalt pavement of the old Roman road, and ruts in pavements are suggestive of iron-shod waggon-wheels and

noisy traffic. But noise-suggestive though they be, these ruts of the pre-macadamite period are as powerless to break the prevailing sense of solitude, as are the fossil ferns of the pre-adamite period to bring before our eyes the grace of the living plants as they once unrolled their traceried leaves in some primeval brake. The noise ceased with the traffic, and that went away ages ago, when the waggons disappeared, along with the hands that had fashioned them. And yet, if the traveller would but remove the few feet of earth, heaped by time over the fields in which he is standing, he would find more than enough to counteract the influence of the desolation and dead silence that have soured him. He would find his feet resting on the ruins of cities, the foundations of which were laid before history was; the stones of whose walls were hewn by brawny hands, whose deeds are closely interwoven with the early vicissitudes of Rome. The scorched grass and drooping wild flowers would give place to costly mosaics, where art has created flowers of her own, whose imperishable freshness no dog-star may parch. The waters of the neighbouring rivulet, no longer scanty and stained, would spring clear into the air from many a courtyard fountain, and gurgle through long-forgotten conduits to the marble baths they once refreshed. For here formerly rose the walls of Fidenae, Crustumerium, Nomentum, Corniculum, and Ficulea. This laying bare of the past, which no single traveller could effect for himself, has been done long since for all.

As far back as 1824, excavations were under taken in this neighbourhood, and carried on with splendid success.

In 1856-57, they were resumed by the Congregation of the Propaganda to whom the place belongs, and a new series of discovery was inaugurated, which has brought to light many interesting objects connected with the city of Ficulea, the site of which had been hitherto unknown.

We are not going to give an account of the various populations that ebbed and flowed over this region, nor to examine whether the Osci or Siculi were the dominant race. But we shall pick up a few of the waifs and strays stranded by these tribe waves as they rolled in one after another, and from them endeavour to gain some idea of the aspect presented by the beach on which they broke. In other words, by help of the monuments brought to light in the excavation, we shall try and get a peep at the everyday life of the old Italian town of Ficulea.

First of all, the worthy Marcus Concins Cerenthus reads us a sermon from a stone

erected by himself to perpetuate the memory of his own good works. He was charged with the duties of Accensus Valatus, and in consequence enjoyed the immunities belonging to the sacerdotal body. He acquaints us in his inscription that he had, of his own free will, paved a part of the hill, 340 feet long and nine feet broad, together with the foot paths. Besides which, he had made the said hill easier for travellers by filling up the valley and lowering the top. If this excellent functionary could be translated into a corresponding modern official, his position in society would be exactly that of a town and parliamentary crier in holy orders. We are inclined to doubt, however, whether any one of his lay brethren of to-day would be willing to constitute himself a benevolent Board of Public Works full of as much zeal for the well-being of the Queen's highway, as was their reverend predecessor of the old Italian town. I need we wonder that Ficulea, blessed in the possession of such public-spirited, self-commemorating authorities, became a favourite summer residence for the worn-out statesmen and citizens of Rome? Cicero writes to tell Atticus of his intention to spend some days at his suburban retreat there. The poet Martial styles a nephew his neighbour twice over, since they lived close to each other both in Rome and in old Ficulea.

What a venerable city! which in the days of Martial was distinguished by the epithet of "the old."

Next come the boys and girls of the public schools. The Ficulensian territory had been given long before by the Senate to Appius Claudius, as a home for the crowd of hungry clients which had followed him up from the Sabine country. It is almost certain, therefore, that some of these school children were their descendants. If so, the old Claudian blood must have been strangely sweetened in their veins by lapse of time, so as to make possible the precocious burst of loyalty with which they greet the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in a tablet of thanksgiving. It was but little to call his majesty Sovereign Pontiff; to respect him as tribune, as consul; to address him as a most excellent and most indulgent Prince. These youthful courtiers give a retrospective character to their flattery by burning incense to his hereditary greatness. They salute him as the son of the godlike Antoninus Pius, the grandson of the godlike Hadrian, the great-grandson of the godlike Trajan, the Parthian, the great-great-grandson of the godlike Nerva. It would appear that emperors in those days lived to be called not so much the nephews of their uncles, as the great-great-grand-sons of their great-great-grandmother's husband. It may be that the lowest form boys of the Ficulensian school had been set to calculate according to the De Morgan of the day the precise

amount of divinity enshrined in their Emperor. Given four imperial ancestors, each rejoicing in divine attributes, how divine must that emperor be who claimed descent from all four!

The stage upon which this goodly company of statesmen, poets, priests, youths and maidens! played their respective parts, was not unworthy of their buskins and real life masks. The hilly road which the good priest had subdued, once crossed the little rivulet whose banks are now shaded by a few stunted trees. The excavators have laid bare close to these trees the pavements of what had been once luxurious bath-rooms. The masonry of the walls has fallen a prey to devastation and time, but the floors of four large apartments have escaped uninjured. In the first apartment are represented in mosaic seven baskets filled with fruit and flowers, with two birds of light plumage resting on the flowers of one of them, the other six being arranged in graceful order around. Outside all the vases and surrounding them runs a large circlet formed of leafy sprays, garlanded together, and relieved with gay colours all about. In each of the four corners chubby heads, with winged temples and swollen puffy cheeks, proclaim themselves to be the four winds.

On the floor of the next apartment, Theseus and the Minotaur are engaged in deadly combat in the Labyrinth, the winding mazes of which, by a graceful treatment, form as it were a frame for the group depicted within. Neptune and Antiope figure in the third room; the fourth exhibits a man of colossal size, in a state of the most intense nervous agitation. The unearthly group of fantastic, uncanny, sea monsters that surround him, at once put us in mind of poor Proteus engaged in tending his unruly herd. The walls were coated with delicate slabs of the rarest marbles, with a zone of rosso antico above, the scattered fragment still remaining attesting the magnificence of the whole. A slab of porta santa is still to be found near the leaden pipes that conveyed the water to the baths.

But who were the inmates of this dwelling? Who were they to whose splendid ease these baths once ministered? What their tastes? their histories? their lives? To their tastes nothing beyond what we have described remains to witness, save a marble head crowned with laurel, two heads of aged women, and some crushed fragments of a large and exquisitely chiselled statue. Of them selves we know nothing. In this less fortunate than the very bricks of the walls, which still bear impressed upon them the mark of the furnace in which they were burned, the owners of this place have left no

certain traces of themselves behind. There are, indeed, some handfuls of ashes in the mortuary urns close by, but who shall say whether they belong to master or to slave? All that remains of the history of Ficulea and of its long career of activity is written in shattered mosaics, mutilated marbles, and human ashes.

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